DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 683 FL 014 492

AUTHOR Thomas, Donald W.
TITLE Levels of Understanding Language in Semiotics.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Course Content; Course Descriptions; Course Evaluation; Course Organization; Instructional Materials; *Linguistics; Secondary Education; Secondary School Curriculum; *Semiotics; *Student Evaluation; *Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

A course in semiotics developed and taught for 16 years at Brookline High School in Massachusetts is described. The course uses four published texts, a series of readings, experiments, language games, and exercises in an effort to broaden, objectify, and integrate the students' conception of language. It consists of four units: (1) signs, language, and reality; (2) communication in man and beast; (3) communication, codes and culture; and (4) language in the making, or theories of the origin of language. Students are evaluated according to the level of thinking about language expressed in writing by the student, based on a theory of five levels of understanding, as well as by the usual methods of evaluation: tests, quizzes, and papers. A comparison of the levels of student understanding at the beginning and end of the course with non-participants' understanding levels at the beginning and end of a standard English course revealed an average increase of 1.05 levels in the first group and of .05 level in the second. Through a grant, two dozen teachers have been trained and the course installed in ten high schools in the greater Boston area. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED246683

ABSTRACT

Levels of Understanding Language in Semiotics

Donald W. Thomas

This paper describes a course in semiotics developed and taught over the past sixteen years at Brookline High School. Using four published texts, a series of readings, experiments, language games, and exercises, the course seeks to broaden, objectify and integrate the student's conception of language. Through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, two dozen teachers have been trained and the course installed in ten high schools in the Greater Boston Area. Evaluation of these pilot courses is based on five "levels of understanding language." Results showed an average increase of 1.05 levels in initial and final written conceptions of language; whereas control groups showed an increase of .05 levels.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Donald W. Thomas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it. Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

FL014492

LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE IN SEMIOTICS

Donald W. Thomas
Brookline High School
Brookline, MA 02146

For those who labor in the formative ranks of education there appear to be certain axioms of instruction. One such axiom might be stated as follows: "If some portion of content cannot be taught successfully at a given level, start teaching it earlier." A second axiom is a variant of the first, namely, "If some portion of content can be taught successfully at a given level, find some way to teach it faster." In each of these axioms the underlying assumption seems to be this: quantity and quality in teaching are interchangeable. In a word, more is better, whether more refers to the amount of time devoted to a subject or to the amount of content covered during that time.

Just how universal these axioms may be for instruction I must leave for you to judge. My purpose in stating them is to anticipate objections that might naturally occur to you upon hearing that so seemingly esoteric a subject as semiotics is actually being taught in schools. Thus, you may be inclined to ascribe the motive for early instruction in semiotics to axiom number one; that is, as an attempt to teach students what they seem unable to learn successfully later at a university. Or you may suspect that, besides being premature, our purpose is merely presumptuous, inasmuch as we are endeavoring to accelerate in some fashion what is best left in the hands of higher education.

Let me hasten to affirm that such is neither the intent nor the effect of Project Semiotics. Clearly, the quantity of instruction may never supplant its quality. My motives for undertaking instruction in signs in 1966 were mainly threefold. My first motive was simply a dissatisfaction with current attempts to teach something about language in schools. Traditional grammar seemed to me an arid and drastically curtailed description of what language purported to be. Albeit fundamental to understanding the functions that words play in sentences and to comprehending certain matters of usage, at best grammar seemed somewhat premature, like studying optics before be allowed to paint. At worst, grammar paraded as an authoritative explanation for what was in fact poorly understood. If students managed to survive their first exposure to grammar - and plainly many did not - they tended to emerge from their experience either scarred with apprehension for syntactical error or blunted by inert views of the instrument they had thought to master.

My second motive for pursuing semiotics was an equal disenchantment with the "linguistic" alternatives then fashionable for teaching grammar. Whereas these approaches offered promise of real inquiry into the nature of language, in practice that promise was seldom, if ever, achieved in schools. To begin with, the proponents of the two schools - the structural and the generative - seemed preoccupied with the urge to discount opposing theories. As I.A. Richards was prompted to observe, "They are covertly contending for the right to dictate the questions that may be asked and to proscribe those that may not." Lacking any clear-cut course, school teachers chose to teach no grammar, to return to traditional grammar, or merely to exchange one set of terminology for another and continue to teach grammar as before. In effect, then, linguistics failed to offer any real alternative to traditional language instruction.

My final motive for introducing semiotics into schools was rejection of such remaining alternatives as general semantics, visual literacy, and the multiplicity of so-called "communication" courses. What these approaches gained in interest and applicability they seemed to lose in rigor and scope. General semantics, for instance, assumed a normative posture towards language, raging against linguistic pollution as if man's symbolic capacity were to be construed as a kind of calamity.

It was under such circumstances that I stumbled upon semiotics and gradually came to pursue it as the most promising framework for instruction. To my knowledge there were at the time no other attempts to teach semiotics in the schools. But I have since learned that my path to semiotics, though personal, was by no means singular. Let me now summarize the current status of Project Semiotics before going on to describe some of its curriculum and the results we have managed to document.

In the fall of 1968 I initiated a course in semiotics as an offering in English at Brookline High School. Since that time some 5000 students have taken the course and two dozen teachers have been trained to teach it. We continue to offer semiotics as an English elective for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders. The course is divided into two semesters either or both of which students may take for credit in English. Because we do not stipulate any level for the course, our students tend to fall within the full range of ability. It is their interest rather than their academic ability or achievement which determines their acceptance into the course. However, I would guess that our typical student is inclined to be slightly better than average.

in 1977 I received a sizable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to enlarge our audience and to test our results in other systems. Our aims were to publish the curriculum in four separate texts, to develop prototypes of experimental equipment used in class, to train teachers from school systems within the Greater Boston Area, to install the course in these systems on a pilot basis, and to evaluate and disseminate our results. By 1982 all these aims were satisfactorily met. We trained 21 teachers from ten school systems which together constituted a cross-section of educational settings - some urban, some suburban, and some industrial.

As time allows, let me now indicate the content and methodology used in the course. The first semester serves as an introduction and uses a single text (Semiotics 1: Signs, Language & Reality) plus a Handbook that contains instruction in the skills of writing and asking questions, a set of experiments, assignments, and questions on all the readings. The main text offers readings from such authors as Plato, Berkeley, Helen Keller, Jean Itard, Merleau-Ponty, Charles Peirce, Langer, Borges, H.G. Wells, Edwin Abbott, Wittgenstein. Concluding chapters are devoted to a set of language games and an introduction to the five major types of signs. If you find it difficult to believe that average students can read and understand such material, I can only reply that it is no more or less demanding than - say - algebra. Of course, we do not simply throw the students to the authors; the readings must be carefully taught. That they can be taught and taught successfully, however, need not be attributed soley to our efforts. The subject matter they contain is eminently teachable because it addresses issues that are both intriguing and accessible to students. At the same time, the material must be presented in such a way that it can be experienced. In other words, it must be laced with with the concrete.

Our five experiments in the first semester are designed to provide the desired concreteness. Each of these experiments pivots on some aspect of perception. Two of the experiments, for example, are taken from the Ames demonstrations on perception - the trapezoidal window and the distorted room. Essentially, they reveal what Ames called "assumptive seeing," the phenomenon of seeing what we believe rather than what is. In another experiment we flash a series of twelve simple line drawings on a screen in rapid succession and ask students to reproduce them as accurately as possible after seeing all twelve. One quarter to one third of their drawings turn out to be distorted by their conceptions of what they believe these objects to represent. All the experiments have been selected or contrived with a view to inducing similar conflicts between perception and conception. Since all students are expert perceivers, and since all our experments produce the desired effects, the issues implicit in each experiment are accessible to all and reflect the issues we are investigating in the readings.In essence, these issues question our relationship between the reality we perceive and the one we think, the relation between the word and the thing. Our object is to demonstrate how signs mediate our world.

With the exception of the final chapter on signs, the actual semiotic content of the first semester remains largely implicit. In contrast, the content of the second semester becomes increasingly explicit. We divide the second semester into three units of study, each with its own separate text. The first unit (Semiotics 2: Communication in Man & Beast) considers the field of animal communication. Our aim is first to familiarize students with some particulars of ethology. We show them what to look for and ask them to observe an animal of their own choosing. Readings in the text stress both the differences and the similarities between animal communication and human language. It is here that we offer our first precise definition of language and ask students to apply it to recent attempts to teach chimps American Sign Language.

Our second unit of the semester (Semiotics 3: Communication, Codes & Culture) focuses on culture. Building from the prior unit, we turn the students' attention to observing human behavior. In essence, we want to make them cognizant of the underlying organization that pervades seemingly spontaneous experience. We begin with the static contrivances of the human environment, such as the organization of a top bureau drawer or a kitchen cabinet. Why are just these things to be found here and what is the system that controls their placement? Next we have them observe each other performing common tasks, such as using the telephone, checking a book out of the library, getting on a bus. What are the components of knowledge implied by these acts? Preparation for these activities includes readings and exercises on aspects of componential analysis, kinship systems, face-to-face interaction, and literature.

The third and final unit of the semester and of the year (Semiotics 4: Language in the Making) returns to language. The unit begins by considering theories on the origin of language: e.g., the Bible, Rousseau, von Herder, and so forth. Using these readings as a point of departure, students are asked to construct their own theories of language origin. The second half of the unit is devoted to preparing each student for constructing his or her own language, complete with culture, phonology, grammatical structure, lexicon, and writing system.

With this summary description of course content in hand, let us now turn to the method of evaluation used to assess student achievement. Since our ultimate aim is to influence how students think about communication in general and language in particular, we base our assessment of instruction on what students have to say about their thinking. At the very beginning and end of the course we ask students to tell us in writing what they think about language, how they conceive of it in its entirety. Although students receive instruction in language throughout their school careers, their opinions about language are evidently never solicited. Consequently, we are not surprised to find their initial conceptions quite primitive. Essentially, they are inclined to view language as any form of communication; the barking of dogs, facial expressons, gestures, musical scores, dance, art - all these are seemingly united by their common function of communication and are therefore construed as merely different forms of language.

Our chief aim is to broaden, objectify, and integrate these conceptions. To measure progress in student thinking about language, we posit five cumulative levels of understanding. Initial conceptions usually fall within the first of these levels, a level which sees no distinction between language and communication, and which consequently does not suspect either the limits of language or its systematic nature. At the second level of understanding the student begins to objectify his initial conception by amassing purported facts about language - the multiplicity of tongues, differences in dialects, details of both verbal and non-verbal expression. Still there is no hint of doubt about the potential of these various modes for expressing thought. Like words, music, gestures, or primal screams, these winged messengers soar unfettered from one orifice to another, faithfully delivering their intended meaning. Level two documents the wonderful world of communication.

Not until they reach the third level of understanding do students become cognizant of what we call, after Flavell, "the problem of existence," namely, that what you may perceive, think, or feel may not coincide with what I perceive, think, or feel. Here students revel in their discovery of the relativity of meaning, a relativity which they attribute to the arbitrary and conventional nature of language. Now, because meaning is relative, one has not only the right to one's opinion, but also the privilege of considering all opinions equally right.

Progress in understanding at the next two levels brings increasing awareness of intersubjectivity, of the systematic qualities of reason and language, and of the need for taking a stance in the face of doubt. At level four the student sees the differences as well as the similarities between language and communication, and can proceed to document them. Level five grasps the paradox of language but commits itself to resolving this paradox. After Husserl, the student at the culminating level perceives "wonder in the face of a word."

Naturally, although we employ normal means of assessing daily work through tests, quizzes, papers, and so forth, we never discuss these levels with students, nor do we address them directly in instruction. We expect that for every semester of instruction in semiotics students will increase their understanding of language, according to our criteria, by one level. Whether a student begins at level one, as most do, or at level 3 is of no special consequence. What matters is how far individual students progress

in their thinking. In general, however, we have found that the levels do reflect the levels of achievement attained by ordinary measures; e.g., homework, class participation. What we hoped to determine by administering this form of evaluation in pilot schools was if the rate of increase in levels of understanding might be duplicated by other teachers in other settings and with other students. If so, then both our course and our mode of training and assessment would be by that much vindicated.

Initial evaluation of our first semester of pilot instruction supported our claims, the average increase in all schools amounting to .96 levels. However, this assessment was implemented without benefit of control groups who had not received instruction in semiotics. Moreover, these assessments had been carried out by each teacher with his or her own students. At the termination of first semester instruction the following year, we therefore prepared a more elaborate and precise procedure for assessment of student conceptions. Conceptions from all participating pilot schools were duly coded and pooled so that no teacher marked his or her own students' conceptions. In addition, conceptions from two control groups engaged in regular English courses were blindly mixed into the general pool, so that their status could not be detected.

Results from this second assessment yielded the following figures. For semiotics classes average initial conceptions fell at level 1.31, while average final conceptions attained a level of 2.37, thus yielding an average increase of levels among 153 semiotics students of 1.05 levels. In contrast, the average initial conceptions of 47 students in the control groups fell at level 1.05, while average final conceptions attained a level of only 1.1, thus yielding an average advance of .05 levels.

END